SPECIFICATION

# A NUCLEIC ACID CONSTRUCT CONTAINING A NUCLEIC ACID DERIVED FROM THE GENOME OF HEPATITIS C VIRUS (HCV) OF GENOTYPE 2a, AND A CELL HAVING SUCH NUCLEIC ACID CONSTRUCT INTRODUCED THEREIN

## TECHNICAL FIELD

The present invention relates to a replicon RNA of the hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a, a replicon-replicating cell wherein the replicon RNA is introduced, and a method of increasing the replication efficiency of the replicon RNA.

## BACKGROUND ART

The hepatitis C virus (HCV) is a virus belonging to the family Flaviviridae. It has a single-stranded (+) strand sense RNA as its genome and is known to cause hepatitis C. Recent studies have revealed that Hepatitis C virus is classified into a number of types based on genotypes or serotypes. According to the phylogenetic analysis of Simmonds et al., using the nucleotide sequences of the HCV strains, which is currently a mainstream method of classifying HCV genotypes, HCV is classified into 6 genotypes: genotype 1a, genotype 1b, genotype 2a, genotype 2b, genotype 3a and genotype 3b (see Simmonds, P. et al, Hepatology, (1994) 10, pp. 1321-1324). Each of these types is further classified into several subtypes. The nucleotide sequences of the full-length genomes of a several number of genotypes of HCV have been determined to date (see JP Patent Publication (Kokai) No. 2002-171978 A; Choo et al., Science, (1989) 244, pp. 359-362; Kato et al., J. Med. Virol., (2001) 64(3) pp. 334-339; Okamoto, H et al, J. Gen. Virol., (1992) 73 pp. 673-679; and Mori, S. et al, Biochem. Biophis. Res. Commun., (1992) 183, pp. 334-342).

HCV causes chronic hepatitis by persistent infection. Currently, the main cause of chronic hepatitis observed worldwide is persistent HCV infection. Actually, around 50% of individuals with persistent infection develop chronic hepatitis. Chronic hepatitis in approximately 20% of these patients shifts to liver cirrhosis over the course of 10 to 20 years, and some of these patients further go on to advanced lethal pathological conditions such as hepatic cancer.

Hepatitis C is currently treated mainly by a therapy using interferon-α or interferon-β, or a therapy using in combination interferon-α and ribavirin, the purine-nucleoside derivative. However, even when these therapies are performed, the therapeutic effects are observed in only approximately 60% of all the treated patients. When the therapies are ceased after the exertion of the effects, the disease recrudesces in more than half of the patients. The therapeutic effect of interferones is known to relate to HCV genotypes, and is said to be lower against genotype 1b and higher against genotype 2a (see Yoshioka et al., Hepatology, (1992) 16(2): pp. 293-299).

It is an important goal to develop therapeutic agents or prophylactic agents effective against hepatitis C, the incidence rate of which is high in industrial countries, for which currently no causal treatment are present, and which finally bring about serious results. Hence, the development of HCV-specific chemotherapies and vaccine therapies are earnestly desired. A target for the development of an anti-HCV agent may be the suppression of HCV replication or the suppression of infection of cells with HCV.

Until recently, propagation of HCV in a cell culture system and infecting cultured cells with HCV have been difficult. Moreover, a chimpanzee has been the only animal that can be infected with HCV and can be used in experiments, so that it has been difficult to carry out studies on the replication mechanism of HCV

and the infection mechanism of HCV. However, recently, HCV subgenomic RNA replicons have been prepared as HCV-derived autonomously replicable RNA (see JP Patent Publication (Kokai) No. 2001-17187 A; Lohmann et al., Science, (1999) 285, pp. 110-113; Blight et al., Science, (2000) 290, pp. 1972-1974; Friebe et al., J. Virol., (2001) 75(24): pp. 12047-12057; Ikeda et al., J. Virol., (2002) 76(6): pp. 2997-3006), which enables the analysis of the replication mechanism of HCV using cultured cells. These HCV subgenomic RNA replicons are each prepared by substituting structural proteins existing downstream of HCV IRES in the 5' untranslated region of the HCV genomic RNA of genotype 1b with a neomycin resistance gene and EMCV IRES that has been ligated downstream of the resistance gene. It has been demonstrated that this RNA replicon is autonomously replicated in human hepatic cancer cells, Huh7 cells, when introduced into the Huh7 cells followed by culture in the presence of neomycin.

However, regarding such intracellular RNA replication systems for HCV, only those using HCV genomic RNA of genotype 1b have been prepared so far. Since there has been a report that different genotypes of HCV differ also in viral proteins encoded, it may be difficult to sufficiently elucidate the replication mechanism of HCV only by analyzing the subgenomic RNA replicons derived from HCV of genotype 1b. Furthermore, based on the fact that the therapeutic effects of interferons differ depending on the HCV genotypes, it may be particularly difficult to develop an anti-HCV agent having an effect on various types of HCV by the use of only an HCV replication system containing the subgenomic RNA replicon of HCV of genotype 1b.

## SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The contents of Japanese Patent Application Nos. 2003-148242 and 2003-329115, from which the present application claims priority, are incorporated herein.

An object of the present invention is to provide an HCV-derived replicon RNA of a HCV genotype for which replicon RNA has not yet been prepared.

As a result of intensive studies to achieve the above object, we have succeeded in preparing the replicon RNA of HCV genotype 2a.

That is, the present invention is as follows.

[1] A replicon RNA, comprising a nucleotide sequence containing at least the 5' untranslated region, the nucleotide sequence encoding NS3 protein, NS4A protein, NS4B protein, NS5A protein and NS5B protein and the 3' untranslated region on the genomic RNA of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a. Preferably, this replicon RNA further contains at least one selection marker gene or a reporter gene, and at least one IRES sequence.

[2] A replicon RNA, comprising a nucleotide sequence containing the 5' untranslated region comprising the nucleotide sequence represented by either SEQ ID NO: 9 or 10; at least one selection marker gene or a reporter gene; an IRES sequence; the nucleotide sequence encoding NS3 protein, NS4A protein, NS4B protein, NS5A protein and NS5B protein on the genomic RNA of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a; and the 3' untranslated region comprising the nucleotide sequence represented by either SEQ ID NO: 11 or 12.

[3] The replicon RNA of [1] or [2] above, wherein the genomic RNA of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a is an RNA comprising the nucleotide sequence represented by SEQ ID NO: 3 or 5.

[4] A replicon RNA, comprising the following RNA (a) or (b):

(a) an RNA comprising the nucleotide sequence represented by SEQ ID NO: 1 or 2; and

(b) an RNA comprising a nucleotide sequence derived from the nucleotide sequence represented by SEQ ID NO: 1 or 2 by deletion, substitution or addition of 1 to 10 nucleotides, and being capable of autonomous replication.

[5] A replicon-replicating cell, which is prepared by introducing the replicon RNA of any one of [1] to [4] above into a cell. For this replicon-replicating cell, a cell into which the replicon RNA is introduced is preferably a eukaryotic cell, more preferably a human liver-derived cell, a human uterine cervix-derived cell or a human fetal kidney-derived cell, and further more preferably any one cell selected from the group consisting of an Huh7 cell, an HepG2 cell, an IMY-N9 cell, an HeLa cell and a 293 cell.

[6] The replicon RNA of [1] to [4] above, which is for producing or evaluating a therapeutic agent or a diagnostic agent against hepatitis C virus infection.

[7] The replicon-replicating cell of [5] above, which is for producing or evaluating a therapeutic agent or a diagnostic agent against hepatitis C virus infection.

[8] The replicon RNA of [1] to [4] above, which is for producing a vaccine against hepatitis C virus infection.

[9] The replicon-replicating cell of [5] above, which is for producing a vaccine against hepatitis C virus infection.

[10] A method of producing a replicon RNA of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a, comprising extracting the replicon RNA from the replicon-replicating cell of [5] above.

[11] A method of producing a viral protein of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a, comprising culturing the replicon-replicating cell of [5] above, and obtaining the viral protein from the resulting culture product.

[12] A method of screening for a substance promoting or suppressing the replication of hepatitis C virus, comprising culturing the replicon-replicating cell of [5] above in the presence of a test substance, and detecting the replication of a replicon RNA in the resulting culture product.

[13] A method of increasing the replication efficiency of the replicon RNA of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a, comprising performing once or more the following: obtaining a replicated replicon RNA from the replicon-replicating cell of [5] above, and introducing the thus obtained replicated replicon RNA into a cell

that is different from the replicon-replicating cell so as to prepare a new replicon-replicating cell. In this method, it is more preferred that the replication efficiency increases to become preferably at least two times greater than that of the replicon RNA that is introduced at the beginning into the replicon-replicating cell.

[14] A method of producing a replicon RNA of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a having increased replication efficiency, comprising performing once or more the following: obtaining a replicated replicon RNA from the replicon-replicating cell of [5] above, and introducing the thus obtained replicated replicon RNA into a cell that is different from the replicon-replicating cell so as to prepare a new replicon-replicating cell; and obtaining a replicated replicon RNA from the finally obtained replicon-replicating cell.

[15] A method of producing a replicon RNA of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a having increased replication efficiency, comprising detecting a nucleotide mutation or an amino acid mutation between the replicon RNA that is produced so as to have an increased replication efficiency by the method of [14] above and the replicon RNA that is introduced at the beginning into the replicon-replicating cell; and introducing the thus detected nucleotide mutation or amino acid mutation into a replicon RNA whose replication efficiency is to be increased.

[16] A replicon RNA, comprising a nucleotide sequence derived from the nucleotide sequence represented by SEQ ID NO: 1 by at least one mutation selected from the group consisting of the following (a) to (u):

(a) a mutation from A to G at nucleotide site 7157;

(b) a mutation from C to U at nucleotide site 4955;

(c) a mutation from A to G at nucleotide site 4936;

(d) a mutation from A to G at nucleotide site 5000;

(e) a mutation from A to G at nucleotide site 7288;

(f) a mutation from G to U at nucleotide site 5901;

(g) a mutation from A to U at nucleotide site 6113;

(h) a mutation from A to G at nucleotide site 2890;
(i) a mutation from C to A at nucleotide site 6826;
(j) a mutation from C to A at nucleotide site 6887;
(k) a mutation from U to A at nucleotide site 6580;
(l) a mutation from U to C at nucleotide site 7159;
(m) a mutation from U to A at nucleotide site 7230;
(n) a mutation from C to A at nucleotide site 6943;
(o) a mutation from G to A at nucleotide site 5687;
(p) a mutation from A to G at nucleotide site 6110;
(q) a mutation from U to C at nucleotide site 5550;
(r) a mutation from A to G at nucleotide site 7217;
(s) a mutation from A to G at nucleotide site 3643;
(t) a mutation from G to A at nucleotide site 5851; and
(u) a mutation from G to A at nucleotide site 5914.

According to the present invention, an HCV-RNA replicon derived from the genotype 2a strain of HCV has been provided for the first time. The replicon-replicating cell according to the present invention can be used as a culture system for the continuous production of RNA and HCV proteins derived from HCV of genotype 2a. Furthermore, the replicon-replicating cell according to the present invention is useful as a test system for screening for various substances that affect HCV replication and/or the translation of HCV proteins.

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Fig.1 is a schematic view showing procedures for constructing a template DNA for preparing the HCV-RNA replicon according to the present invention. The upper section of Fig. 1 shows the structure of the region within pJFH1 or pJCH1, with the viral genome inserted into it. The lower section of Fig. 1 shows the structure of the region within plasmid DNA pSGREP-JFH1 or pSGREP-JCH1,

with the viral genome inserted into it, that had been constructed by substituting a part of viral genome-inserted region of pJFH1 or pJCH1 with a DNA fragment containing a neomycin resistance gene and EMCV IRES. Symbols in Fig. 1 are as described below. T7, T7 RNA promoter; G, dGTP that was inserted upstream of the 5' end of the inserted DNA derived from JFH-1 or JCH-1 and downstream of the 3' end of T7 RNA promoter sequence; 5' NTR, 5' untranslated region; Core, core protein; and 3' NTR, 3' untranslated region. E1 and E2 represent envelope proteins. NS2, NS3, NS4A, NS4B, NS5A and NS5B represent non-structural proteins. *Age* I, *Cla* I and *Xba* I represent cleavage sites of restriction enzymes *Age* I, *Cla* I and *Xba* I, respectively. GDD, the position of amino acid motif GDD corresponding to the active center of NS5B protein; neo, neomycin resistance gene; and EMCV IRES, internal ribosome entry site of encephalomyocarditis virus (EMCV IRES).

Fig. 2 A to F shows the nucleotide sequence of rSGREP-JFH1.

Fig. 3 A to F shows the nucleotide sequence of rSGREP-JCH1.

Fig. 4 shows photographs showing the colony formation of Huh7 cells to which rSGREP-JFH1, rSGREP-JFH1/GND and rSGREP-JFH1/dGDD was transfected, respectively. The amount of each of three transfected RNAs in the upper section was 100 ng and that of three transfected RNAs in the lower section was 300 ng. 1.0 mg/ml G418 was added to each culture dish.

Fig. 5 shows photographs showing colony formation of Huh7 cells to which rSGREP-JFH1 and rSGREP-JCH1 respectively had been transfected when the concentration of G418 was 0.5 mg/ml of the medium. The amount of each of these RNAs transfected was 100 ng.

Fig. 6 shows photographs showing the effect of Mung Bean Nuclease treatment conducted on the colony-forming ability of the transfected cells. The amount of rSGREP-JFH1 RNA transfected was 100 ng for both cases. The concentration of G418 was 1.0 mg/ml in both media.

Fig. 7 shows photographs showing colony formation when total cellular RNA derived from the replicon-replicating cell clone, which had been established by transfection of rSGREP-JFH1, was retransfected to another Huh7 cells. The photograph on the left shows that the formation of 96 colonies was observed as a result, when using the total cellular RNA derived from the replicon-replicating cell clone No. 6. The photograph on the right shows that the formation of 77 colonies was observed as a result, when using the total cellular RNA derived from the pool clones. In both cases, RNA was retransfected in an amount containing $1\times10^7$ copies of the replicon RNA.

Fig. 8 shows photographs showing the results of detecting by the Northern blot method using an rSGREP-JFH1-specific probe for the total RNA derived from a cell clone that had been obtained by retransfecting the total cellular RNA (derived from the replicon-replicating cell clone established by transfection of rSGREP-JFH1) into another Huh7 cells. Explanation of the lanes is as follows. $10^8$ represents sample prepared by adding $10^8$ copies of the replicon RNA synthesized in vitro to total RNA extracted from Huh7 cells. $10^7$ represents sample prepared by adding $10^7$ copies of the replicon RNA synthesized in vitro to total RNA extracted from Huh7 cells. Huh7, total RNA extracted from untransfected Huh7 cells; pool clone, total RNA extracted from the pool clones; and 1-11, total RNA extracted from each of cell clones Nos. 1 to 11. "Replicon RNA" represents the electrophoresed position of a molecular weight marker indicating the size of rSGREP-JFH1, "28S" represents the same of a ribosomal RNA marker indicating the size of molecular weight of 4.5 kb, and "18S"

represents the same of a ribosomal RNA marker indicating the size of molecular weight of 1.9 kb.

Fig. 9 shows photographs showing the presence or the absence of the incorporation of a neomycin resistance gene into the genomic DNA of a host cell in the cell clone to which rSGREP-JFH1- or rSGREP-JCH1-derived replicated replicon RNA was retransfected. Explanation of the lanes in the photograph on the left is as follows. M, DNA molecular weight marker; 1-8, rSGREP-JFH1-derived cell clones Nos. 1 to 8; N, untransfected Huh7 cells; and P, positive control (PCR amplification product of the neomycin resistance gene). Furthermore, explanation of the lanes in the photograph on the right is as follows. M, DNA molecular weight marker; and 1-6, rSGREP-JCH1-derived cell clones Nos. 1 to 6.

Fig. 10 shows photographs showing the results of detecting NS3 protein expressed in the cell clone that was retransfected with rSGREP-JFH1- or rSGREP-JCH1-derived replicated replicon RNA. Lanes 1 to 8 of the photograph on the left represent rSGREP-JFH1-derived cell clones Nos. 1 to 8. Lanes 1-6 of the photograph on the right represent rSGREP-JCH1-derived cell clones Nos. 1 to 6. Lane P of the photograph on the right represents NS3 protein (positive control) and N represents protein extracted from untransfected Huh7 cells (negative control).

Fig. 11 shows the positions of nucleotide mutations in replicon RNAs obtained from 21 cell clones that were established through the re-transfection of rSGREP-JFH1-derived replicated replicon RNA into Huh7 cells. Mutation positions are indicated using bar lines shown with nucleotide numbers listed in Table 4. A thick bar line denotes nonsynonymous substitution and a thin bar line denotes synonymous substitution.

Fig. 12 shows photographs showing the results of transfection with rSGREP-JFH1 using A, HepG2 cells; B, IMY-N9 cells; C, 293 cells; or D, HeLa cells. 0.8 mg/ml G418 was added to each culture dish.

Fig. 13 shows photographs showing the results of performing Northern blotting for replicon-replicating cell clones. Lane 1, HepG2 (negative control); lane 2, $10^8$ copies of synthetic RNA; lane 3, $10^7$ copies of synthetic RNA; lane 4, Hep-IH-1 (derived from HepG2 cells); lane 5, Hep-IH-3 (derived from HepG2 cells); lane 6, Hep-IH-5 (derived from HepG2 cells); lane 7, Hep-IH-11 (derived from HepG2 cells); lane 8, Hep-IH-13 (derived from HepG2 cells); lane 9, IMY-IH-3 (derived from IMY-N9 cells); lane 10, IMY-IH-4 (derived from IMY-N9 cells); lane 11, IMY-IH-7 (derived from IMY-N9 cells); lane 12, IMY-IH-10 (derived from IMY-N9 cells); lane 13, cell pools containing 293-IH transfected therein (derived from 293 cells); lane 14, HeLa-IH-9 (derived from HeLa cells); lane 15, HeLa-IH-12 (derived from HeLa cells); lane 16, HeLa-IH-13 (derived from HeLa cells); and lane 17, HeLa (negative control).

Fig. 14 shows photographs showing the results of electrophoresis performed for confirming the incorporation of the neomycin resistance gene into genomic DNA. For each genomic DNA of HepG2 replicon cells (upper section) and IMY-N9 replicon cells (lower section), detection of the neomycin resistance gene was performed by PCR analysis. M, DNA size marker; P, positive control; H, HepG2 cells; I, IMY-N9 cells; and ►, PCR product.

Fig. 15 shows photographs showing the results of analyzing by the Western blot method NS3 and NS5a proteins derived from the replicon-replicating cell clones.

## BEST MODE OF CARRYING OUT THE INVENTION

The present invention is explained in detail as follows.

1. HCV-derived replicon RNA according to the present invention

The genome of hepatitis C virus (HCV) is a single-stranded (+) strand RNA comprising approximately 9600 nucleotides. This genomic RNA comprises the 5' untranslated region (also denoted as 5' NTR or 5' UTR), a translated region composed of a structural region and a non-structural region and the 3' untranslated region (also denoted as 3' NTR or 3' UTR). HCV structural proteins are encoded in the structural region, and a plurality of non-structural proteins are encoded in the non-structural region.

Such HCV structural proteins and non-structural proteins are generated through the translation into a continuous form thereof, a polyprotein, from the translated region, restricted degradation of the polyprotein by protease, and then the release of the structural proteins (Core, E1 and E2) and non-structural proteins (NS2, NS3, NS4A, NS4B, NS5A and NS5B), respectively. Among these structural proteins and non-structural proteins, that is, viral proteins of HCV, Core is a core protein, E1 and E2 are envelope proteins, and non-structural proteins (NS2, NS3, NS4A, NS4B, NS5A and NS5B) are proteins involved in virus's own replication. NS2 is known to have metalloprotease activity, and NS3 is known to have serine protease activity (at one-third of the N terminal side) and helicase activity (at two-thirds of the C-terminal side). Furthermore, NS4A is a cofactor for protease activity of NS3, and NS5B has been reported to have RNA-dependent RNA polymerase activity. Furthermore, the genome of HCV of genotype 2a has already been reported to have a similar gene structure (see JP Patent Publication (Kokai) No. 2002-171978 A).

We have constructed RNA capable of autonomous replication using such HCV genome of genotype 2a. Specifically, the HCV-derived replicon RNA of

the present invention is an RNA construct, which contains the whole or partial RNA of the HCV genome of genotype 2a and is capable of autonomous replication.

In this specification, RNA that is prepared by altering the viral genome of HCV and is capable of autonomous replication is referred to as "replicon RNA" or "RNA replicon." RNA that is artificially prepared from HCV of genotype 2a and is capable of autonomous replication is referred to as "replicon RNA derived from HCV of genotype 2a." In this specification, the HCV-derived replicon RNA is also referred to as an HCV-RNA replicon.

In the present invention, "hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a" or "HCV of genotype 2a" means hepatitis C virus identified as genotype 2a according to the international classification of Simmonds et al. The "hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a" or the "HCV of genotype 2a" of the present invention encompasses not only a virus having naturally occurring HCV genomic RNA, but also a virus having genomic RNA prepared by artificially altering a naturally occurring HCV genomic sequence. Specific examples of HCV of genotype 2a include viruses of JFH-1 strain and the JCH-1 strain (see JP Patent Publication (Kokai) No. 2002-171978 A).

Furthermore, "the genomic RNA of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a" means RNA that comprises the single-stranded (+) strand sense RNA of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a and has the nucleotide sequence throughout the entire region of its genome. The genomic RNA of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a is preferably RNA comprising the nucleotide sequence represented by SEQ ID NO: 3 or 5, but is not limited thereto.

In the specification of the present application, "5' untranslated region"

(5'NTR or 5'UTR), "a sequence encoding NS3 protein, NS4A protein, NS4B protein, NS5A protein and NS5B protein," "a sequence encoding Core protein" (Core region or C region), "a sequence encoding E1 protein" (E1 region), "a sequence encoding E2 protein" (E2 region), "a sequence encoding N2 protein" (NS2 region), "a sequence encoding NS3 protein" (NS3 region), "a sequence encoding NS4A protein" (NS4A region), "a sequence encoding NS4B protein" (NS4B region), "a sequence encoding NS5A protein" (NS5A region), "a sequence encoding NS5B protein" (NS5B region) and "3' untranslated region" (3' NTR or 3' UTR), and other specific regions or sites are determined based on the nucleotide sequence of SEQ ID NO: 3 of the full-length cDNA (JFH-1 clone) encoding the entire region of the genome of the JFH-1 strain, which is HCV of genotype 2a. The nucleotide sequence of SEQ ID NO: 3 can be obtained from the International DNA Data Bank (DDBJ/EMBL/GenBank) by referring to the accession No. AB047639. Specifically, when a particular HCV RNA sequence is aligned with the nucleotide sequence represented by SEQ ID NO: 3, a sequence to be aligned with nucleotides 1 to 340 on the nucleotide sequence represented by SEQ ID NO: 3 is "5' untranslated region" of the RNA, a sequence to be aligned with the nucleotides 3431 to 9442 on the same are a sequence encoding NS3 protein, NS4A protein, NS4B protein, NS5A protein and NS5B protein, a sequence to be aligned with the nucleotides 3431 to 5323 on the same is "a sequence encoding NS3 protein," a sequence to be aligned with the nucleotides 5324 to 5485 on the same is "a sequence encoding NS4A protein," a sequence to be aligned with the nucleotides 5486 to 6268 on the same is a sequence encoding NS4B protein," a sequence to be aligned with the nucleotides 6269 to 7666 on the same is "a sequence encoding NS5A protein," a sequence to be aligned with the nucleotides 7667 to 9442 on the same is "a sequence encoding NS5B protein," and a sequence to be aligned with the nucleotides 9443 to 9678 on the same is "3' untranslated region." Furthermore, in this case, gaps, additions, deletions, substitutions or the like may be present in the "aligned" sequences. Furthermore, the above

"particular HCV" is not limited thereto, and includes the JFH-1 strain or JCH-1 strain, or viral strains that are derivatives thereof.

One embodiment of the HCV RNA-replicon according to the present invention is a replicon RNA comprising a nucleotide sequence containing at least the 5' untranslated region, a sequence encoding NS3 protein, NS4A protein, NS4B protein, NS5A protein and NS5B protein, and the 3' untranslated region on the genomic RNA of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a. The replicon RNA may further contain at least one selection marker gene or one reporter gene, and at least one IRES sequence. Furthermore, this replicon RNA may also contain a sequence encoding a viral protein other than NS3, NS4A, NS4B, NS5A and NS5B proteins on the genomic RNA of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a.

Another preferred embodiment of HCV RNA-replicon according to the present invention is a replicon RNA comprising a nucleotide sequence containing the 5' untranslated region comprising the nucleotide sequence represented by SEQ ID NO: 9 or 10, at least one selection marker gene or reporter gene, the IRES sequence, a sequence encoding NS3 protein, NS4A protein, NS4B protein, NS5A protein and NS5B protein on the genomic RNA of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a, and the 3' untranslated region comprising the nucleotide sequence represented by SEQ ID NO: 11 or 12. In this case the nucleotide sequences represented by SEQ ID NO: 9 and 10 are sequences of the 5' untranslated regions of rSGREP-JFH1 (SEQ ID NO: 1) and rSGREP-JCH1 (SEQ ID NO: 2), respectively, which are replicon RNAs according to the present invention. Furthermore, the nucleotide sequences represented by SEQ ID NO: 11 and 12 are sequences of the 3' untranslated regions of rSGREP-JFH1 (SEQ ID NO: 1) and rSGREP-JCH1 (SEQ ID NO: 2), respectively, which are replicon RNAs according to the present invention.

A more preferred embodiment of HCV RNA-replicon according to the present invention is a replicon RNA comprised of an RNA comprising the nucleotide sequence represented by SEQ ID NO: 1 or 2. Furthermore, a replicon RNA comprising a nucleotide sequence derived from the nucleotide sequence represented by SEQ ID NO: 1 or 2 by deletion, substitution or addition of 1 to 50, 1 to 30, 1 to 10, 1 to 6, or 1 to several (2 to 5) nucleotides, and being capable of autonomous replication is also included in the scope of the present invention as a preferred embodiment. In the present invention, "capable of autonomous replication" means that when replicon RNA is introduced into a cell, the replicon RNA allows its own full-length sequence to be replicated within the cell. For example, this ability of autonomous replication can be confirmed by transfecting replicon RNA into Huh7 cells, culturing the Huh7 cells, extracting RNA from the cells in the thus resulting culture product and conducting Northern blot hybridization for the extracted RNA using a probe that can specifically detect the transfected replicon RNA so as to detect the presence of the replicon RNA. However, examples of such a method are not limited thereto. Specific procedures for confirming the ability of autonomous replication can be conducted according to descriptions given in the Examples of this specification such as those for measuring the ability of colony formation, those for confirming the expression of HCV proteins or those for detecting replicon RNA.

In the present invention, a "selection marker gene" means a gene that can provide a cell with selectivity such that only the cell expressing the gene is selected. A general example of a selection marker gene is an antibiotic resistance gene. In the present invention, preferred examples of a selection marker gene include a neomycin resistance gene, a thymidine kinase gene, a kanamycin resistance gene, a pyrithiamine resistance gene, an adenylyl transferase gene, a Zeocin resistance gene and a puromycin resistance gene. The neomycin resistance gene and the thymidine kinase gene are preferred, and the neomycin

resistance gene is more preferred. However, the selection marker gene in the present invention is not limited to these genes.

Furthermore in the present invention, a "reporter gene" means a marker gene encoding a gene product that is a marker for the expression of the gene. General examples of a reporter gene include structural genes of enzymes that catalyze light emitting reaction or color reaction. Preferred examples of the reporter gene in the present invention include a transposon Tn9-derived chloramphenicol acetyltransferase gene, an *Escherichia coli*-derived β glucuronidase or β galactosidase gene, a luciferase gene, a green fluorescence protein gene, an aequorin gene from jellyfish, and a secreted placental alkaline phosphatase (SEAP) gene. However, the reporter gene in the present invention is not limited to these genes.

Either only one or both of the above selection marker gene and reporter gene may be contained in replicon RNA.

In the present invention, "IRES sequence" means an internal ribosome entry site that allows translation to be initiated by binding ribosomes within the inside of RNA. Preferred examples of IRES sequence in the present invention include, but are not limited to, EMCV IRES (the internal ribosome entry site of encephalomyocarditis virus), FMDV IRES and HCV IRES. EMCV IRES and HCV IRES are more preferred, and EMCV IRES is the most preferred sequence.

The replicon RNA according to the present invention may further contain a sequence on the genomic RNA of another HCV strain or HCV of another genotype. For example, the replicon RNA may also contain a fragment of HCV genome of genotype 1b. Examples of another HCV strain include, but are not limited to, HCV-1, HCV-H, HC-J1, HCT-18, H77, DK-7, US11, S14, HCT23, HCV-Th, DR1,

DR4, HCT27, S18, SW1, DK9, H90, TD-6E1, S9, HCV-BK, T10, DK1, HC-J4, HCV-J, HK3, HK8, HK5, HCV-G3, IND5, IND8, P10, D1, D3, SW2, T3, S45, SA10, US6, HCV-JK1, HCV-JK4, HCV-JK3, HCV-JK2, HCV-JT, HC-J2, HCV-T, HK4, HC-G9, Z1, Bi, S. I., Cho, J.M., HCV-J6, T4, T9, US10, HC-J5, T2, HC-J7, DK11, SW3, DK8, T8, HC-J8, S83, HK2, HC-J6, HC-J8, BEBE1, HCV-J6, HCV-J8, HD10-2, BR36-9, S52, S54, S2, BR33-1, HK10, DK12, HCV-TR, BA-1, BA-2, DK13, Z1, Z4, Z6, Z7, HK2, SA1, SA4, SA5, SA7, SA13, SA6, NZL1, SA30, EG-13, HCV-K3a/650, ED43, EUH1480, EUHK2, Th580, VN235, VN405, VN004, JK049, JK046, JFH-1, JCH-1, JCH-2, JCH-3, JCH-4, JCH-5, JCH-6, J6CF and H77.

The replicon RNA according to the present invention preferably has the 5' untranslated region on the genomic RNA of HCV of genotype 2a on the 5'-most side, and the 3 'untranslated region on the genomic RNA of HCV of genotype 2a on the 3'-most side. A selection marker gene or a reporter gene may be ligated upstream of the IRES sequence, or upstream or downstream of "the sequence encoding NS3 protein, NS4A protein, NS4B protein, NS5A protein and NS5B protein," or inserted in the middle of "the sequence encoding NS3 protein, NS4A protein, NS4B protein, NS5A protein and NS5B protein."

The replicon RNA according to the present invention more preferably has the 5' untranslated region on the genomic RNA of HCV of genotype 2a on the 5'-most side, and a selection marker gene or a reporter gene, the IRES sequence and "the sequence encoding NS3 protein, NS4A protein, NS4B protein, NS5A protein and NS5B protein" downstream of the 5' untranslated region in this order, and the 3' untranslated region on the genomic RNA of HCV of genotype 2a on the 3'-most side.

Examples of the replicon RNA according to the present invention may

include an RNA containing any foreign gene to be expressed within a cell into which the replicon RNA is introduced, in addition to the sequences as described above. A foreign gene may also be ligated downstream of the 5' untranslated region, or ligated upstream or downstream of a selection marker gene or a reporter gene, or ligated upstream or downstream of "the sequence encoding NS3 protein, NS4A protein, NS4B protein, NS5A protein and NS5B protein," or may be inserted in the middle of "the sequence encoding NS3 protein, NS4A protein, NS4B protein, NS5A protein and NS5B protein." A replicon RNA containing a foreign gene can express a protein encoded by the foreign gene when it is translated within a cell into which the RNA is introduced. Thus, the replicon RNA containing a foreign gene can be appropriately used also for gene therapy or the like, the purpose of which is to generate a particular gene product within a cell.

The replicon RNA according to the present invention may further contain a ribozyme. A ribozyme is inserted to ligate a selection marker gene, a reporter gene or a foreign gene on the 5' side in the replicon RNA to those located on the 3' side thereof including the IRES sequence and "the sequence encoding NS3 protein, NS4A protein, NS4B protein, NS5A protein and NS5B protein," so that it enables cleavage and separation of the two by the self-cleavage activity of the ribozyme.

In the replicon RNA according to the present invention, the above described selection marker gene, reporter gene, sequences encoding viral proteins on the genomic RNA of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a, sequences encoding viral proteins of HCV of a genotype other than genotype 2a, a foreign gene or the like are ligated so that they are translated from the replicon RNA in the correct reading frame. Among these sequences, the protein-coding sequences may be ligated to each other via a protease cleavage site and the like, so that after the proteins are expressed as a fusion protein with the polyprotein that is translated from "the sequence encoding NS3 protein, NS4A protein, NS4B protein, NS5A protein and

NS5B protein" of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a, the fusion protein is separated by protease into each protein.

2. Preparation of replicon RNA according to the present invention

The HCV RNA-replicon according to the present invention can be prepared using any genetic engineering techniques known by persons skilled in the art. The HCV RNA-replicon can be prepared by, for example, the following method, but the method of preparation is not limited thereto.

First, DNA corresponding to the entire region of the genomic RNA of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a is ligated downstream of an RNA promoter according to a standard procedure so as to prepare a DNA clone. As used herein, "DNA corresponding to RNA" means a DNA having a nucleotide sequence derived from the nucleotide sequence of the RNA by substituting U (uracil) with T (thymine). The above RNA promoter is preferably an RNA promoter contained in a plasmid clone. An example of an RNA promoter is not limited, but T7 RNA promoter is particularly preferred.

Next, for the thus prepared DNA clone, for example, the structural region (Core sequence, E1 sequence and E2 sequence) located downstream of the 5' untranslated region and the sequence encoding NS2 protein are substituted with a DNA fragment containing a selection marker gene or a reporter gene and the IRES sequence ligated downstream thereof. In this substitution, portions other than the structural region, such as a fragment on the 3' terminal side of the 5' untranslated region or a part of the sequence encoding NS3 protein may be substituted with a sequence derived from HCV of another genotype.

Subsequently, using the DNA clone after the substitution as a template, RNA is synthesized using RNA polymerase. RNA synthesis can be initiated by a standard procedure from the 5' untranslated region and the IRES sequence. When

a template DNA is a plasmid clone, the above DNA region ligated downstream of an RNA promoter is excised by a restriction enzyme from the plasmid clone, and then RNA can be synthesized using the DNA fragment as a template. In addition, preferably the 3' terminus of RNA to be synthesized agrees with the 3' untranslated region of the viral genomic RNA, and no other sequences are added or deleted. The thus synthesized RNA is the replicon RNA according to the present invention.

3. Preparation of replicon-replicating cells into which replicon RNA from HCV of genotype 2a is introduced

The replicon RNA that is prepared as described above is introduced into cells in which the replicon RNA should be replicated, so that cells wherein the replicon RNA is continuously replicated can be obtained. In this specification, a cell wherein replicon RNA is continuously replicated is referred to as a "replicon-replicating cell."

As a cell into which replicon RNA is introduced, any cell can be used, as long as it can be subcultured. Such a cell is preferably a eukaryotic cell, more preferably a human liver-derived cell, a human uterine cervix-derived cell or a human fetal kidney-derived cell, and further preferably any cell selected from the group consisting of Huh7 cells, HepG2 cells, IMY-N9 cells, HeLa cells and 293 cells. As these cells, commercially available cells may be utilized, these cells may be obtained from cell depositories, or cell lines established from any cells (e.g., cancer cells or stem cells) may also be used.

As the above cells, cells that can be mass-cultured are preferably used for the purpose of the mass production of HCV proteins, such as in the case of vaccine production. From such a viewpoint, the cells are preferably those other than Huh7 cells.

Introduction of replicon RNA into cells can be performed using any technique known by persons skilled in the art. Examples of such an introduction method include electroporation, a particle gun method, a lipofection method, a calcium phosphate method, a microinjection method and a DEAE sepharose method. The method using electroporation is particularly preferred.

A replicon RNA of interest may be introduced alone, or may be introduced after it is mixed with other nucleic acids. To vary the quantity of replicon RNA while keeping RNA quantity to be introduced at a certain level, the replicon RNA of interest is mixed with total cellular RNA extracted from cells into which the RNA is introduced, and then the mixture is used for introduction into cells. The quantity of replicon RNA to be used for introduction into cells may be determined depending on the introduction method employed, and is preferably between 1 picogram and 100 micrograms, and more preferably between 10 picograms and 10 micrograms.

When replicon RNA containing a selection marker gene or a reporter gene is used for introduction into cells, cells wherein the replicon RNA is introduced and continuously replicated can be selected utilizing the expression of the selection marker gene or the reporter gene. Specifically, for example, such cells into which replicon RNA has been introduced may be cultured in media whereby the cells can be selected by the expression of the selection marker gene or the reporter gene. As an example, when replicon RNA contains a neomycin resistance gene as a selection marker gene, cells into which replicon RNA has been intracellularly introduced are seeded into a culture dish. After 16 to 24 hours of culture, G418 (neomycin) is added to the culture dish at a concentration of 0.05 milligrams/milliliter to 3.0 milligrams/milliliter. The cells are continuously cultured for preferably 10 days to 40 days and more preferably 14

days to 28 days after seeding, while exchanging the culture solution twice a week. Next, surviving cells are stained with crystal violet, so that cells into which the replicon RNA has been introduced and is being continuously replicated can be selected as formed colonies.

Cloned cells can be obtained from the formed colonies by cloning surviving cells by a standard procedure, and then continuing the culture of the cells. The thus obtained cell clone wherein the replicon RNA of interest is continuously replicated is referred to as "a replicon-replicating cell clone" in this specification.

Regarding the established cell clone, detection of a replicon RNA that has been replicated from the introduced replicon RNA in the cell clone, confirmation of the presence or the absence of the incorporation of a selection marker gene or a reporter gene in the introduced replicon RNA into a host genomic DNA, and confirmation of the expression of an HCV protein are preferably carried out to confirm the fact that a replicon RNA of interest is actually and continuously replicated.

A replicon RNA that has been replicated from the introduced replicon RNA in the cell clone (in this specification, hereinafter conveniently referred to as "replicated replicon RNA") may be detected according to any RNA detection method known by persons skilled in the art. For example, detection can be performed by conducting the Northern hybridization method for total RNA extracted from the cell clone using as a probe a DNA fragment specific to the introduced replicon RNA.

Furthermore, the presence or the absence of the incorporation of a selection marker gene or a reporter gene in the introduced replicon RNA into a

host genomic DNA can be confirmed by, for example, performing PCR for the host genomic DNA extracted from the cell clone to amplify at least a part of the selection marker gene or the reporter gene, and then confirming the presence or the absence of the amplified product. However, examples of relevant methods are not limited thereto. A cell clone for which the amplified product is confirmed is considered to have a selection marker gene or a reporter gene incorporated in the host genome. Thus, regarding the cell clone, the replicon RNA itself may not be continuously replicated within the cell. In this case, whether or not the replicon RNA is continuously replicated can be confirmed by conducting an experiment to confirm the expression of an HCV protein, as described below.

The expression of an HCV protein can be confirmed by, for example, causing an antibody against an HCV protein to be expressed from the introduced replicon RNA and to react with a protein extracted from a cell clone. This method can be conducted by any protein detection method known by persons skilled in the art. Specifically, for example, a protein sample extracted from the cell clone is blotted onto a nitrocellulose membrane, with which an anti-HCV protein antibody (e.g., an anti-NS3-specific antibody or an antiserum collected from a hepatitis C patient) is reacted, and then the anti-HCV protein antibody is detected. If the HCV protein is detected among proteins extracted from the cell clone, it can be concluded that this cell clone continuously replicate HCV-derived replicon RNA to express the HCV protein.

As described above, cell clones confirmed to continuously replicate a replicon RNA of interest (replicon-replicating cell clones) can be obtained. Furthermore in the present invention, replicon RNA can be obtained by any method known by persons skilled in the art, for example, by extracting RNA from the replicon-replicating cell, and then separating replicon RNA from the RNA by an electrophoresis method. The present invention also relates to such a method

of producing replicon RNA. Moreover, preferably, the replicon-replicating cell according to the present invention can be used for producing HCV proteins. Persons skilled in the art can obtain HCV proteins from the replicon-replicating cells according to any standard method. Specifically, for example, a viral protein of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a can be produced by culturing replicon-replicating cells, collecting proteins from the resulting culture product (including cultured cells and culture media) by a standard procedure, and then selectively obtaining viral proteins from the proteins by detection or the like using an anti-HCV protein antibody.

Moreover, when the replicon-replicating cell according to the present invention continuously replicates replicon RNA containing a foreign gene, a protein encoded by the foreign gene can be obtained by the expression thereof using the replicon-replicating cell. Specifically, for example, the protein encoded by a foreign gene can be obtained by culturing replicon-replicating cells, collecting proteins from the resulting culture product (including cultured cells and culture media) by a standard procedure, and then selectively obtaining the protein from among the proteins by detection or the like using an antibody against the protein of interest.

4. Introduction of mutation that increases replication efficiency into replicon RNA from HCV of genotype 2a

Mutation producing enhancement of replication efficiency frequently takes place in the replicon RNA that is replicated or generated in the replicon-replicating cell (replicated replicon RNA) according to the present invention. Such a mutation may be an adaptive mutation.

Utilizing this fact, introduction of a mutation enhancing replication efficiency into the replicon RNA according to the present invention can be

promoted in the present invention.

Specifically, the step comprising obtaining a first replicated replicon RNA by extraction or the like from a first replicon-replicating cell (preferably, a replicon-replicating cell, wherein the replicon RNA according to the present invention has been introduced), and then re-introducing the first replicated replicon RNA into another cell to prepare a second replicon-replicating cell is performed repeatedly once or more, preferably 1 to 10 times, more preferably 1 to 5 times, and further preferably 1 to 2 times, so that the mutation increasing replication efficiency can be introduced at a high frequency into the replicon RNA within the replicon-replicating cells.

As a cell into which a replicated replicon RNA is re-introduced, any cell can be used. Such a cell is preferably derived from a biological species that is the same as that of a cell wherein replicon RNA is introduced at the beginning, more preferably derived from the same tissue derived from the same biological species as that of a cell wherein replicon RNA is introduced at the beginning, and further preferably of a cell line that is the same as that for a cell wherein replicon RNA is introduced at the beginning.

Therefore in the present invention, using the above method, replicon RNA wherein the mutation increasing replication efficiency is introduced can be produced. Specifically, the step comprising obtaining a first replicated replicon RNA by extraction or the like from a first replicon-replicating cell (preferably, a replicon-replicating cell, into which the replicon RNA according to the present invention has been introduced), and then re-introducing the first replicated replicon RNA into another cell so as to prepare a second replicon-replicating cell is performed repeatedly once or more, preferably 1 to 10 times, more preferably 1 to 5 times, and further preferably 1 to 2 times. Subsequently, the replicated

replicon RNA is obtained by extraction or the like from the replicon-replicating cell finally obtained at the end of the repeated steps, so that replicon RNA with increased replication efficiency can be produced.

In the present invention, the replication efficiency of a replicon RNA can be increased at least 2 times, preferably 10 to 100 times, and more preferably 100 to 10000 times by the above method.

Regarding the replicon RNA that is produced by such a method so as to have increased replication efficiency, the nucleotide sequence is preferably determined by a known method, for example, by obtaining cDNA by reverse transcription PCR and subjecting such cDNA to sequencing. Furthermore, the thus determined nucleotide sequence or the amino acid sequence encoded by the nucleotide sequence is compared with the nucleotide sequence of replicon RNA that had been introduced at the beginning into cells, so that adaptive mutation can be identified. As adaptive mutation increasing replication efficiency, in particular, nonsynonymous substitution that mutates an amino acid in a viral protein encoded by replicon RNA is preferred.

The present invention also provides a method whereby the replicon RNA of hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a having increased replication efficiency can be produced by introducing the thus identified adaptive mutation into replicon RNA, the replication efficiency of which is to be increased, by a standard procedure.

The replicon RNA that is produced as described above so as to have increased replication efficiency can be used for producing replicon RNA in large quantity within cells that have been used for the method.

The replication efficiency of the replicon RNA according to the present

invention can be determined by a method known by persons skilled in the art. For example, it can be determined according to the following method. Replicon RNAs are transfected in quantities of 0.0001, 0.0003, 0.001, 0.003, 0.01, 0.03, 0.1, 0.3 and 1.0 micrograms, respectively, into Huh7 cells, selective culture with G418 is performed for 21 days in a method similar to the above experimental techniques, and then the number of colonies formed (number of colonies) is counted. The quantity of RNA introduced is compared with the number of colonies formed to determine the range of the quantity of the replicon RNA introduced, within which colony formation increases in a quantity-dependent manner. The number of colonies formed within the range is divided by the quantity of RNA introduced, and the resulting value is regarded as the colony forming activity per microgram. This equation is as follows.

Colony forming activity [(Colony Forming Unit, or CFU)/microgram] = Number of colonies formed [colony] / quantity of RNA introduced [microgram]

The thus calculated colony forming activity is regarded as a value representing the replication efficiency of replicon RNA introduced. Specifically, the higher the colony forming activity, the higher the replication efficiency of the replicon RNA. In addition, the replication efficiency of replicon RNA can also be shown via a colony-forming ability that is represented by the number of copies of the replicon RNA introduced per formed colony. That is, in this case, the ability can be calculated according to the following equation.

Colony forming ability = number of copies of replicon RNA introduced [copy] / number of formed colonies [colony]

5. Other embodiments of the present invention

The replicon RNA-replicating cell according to the present invention can also be used as a test system for, for example, screening for a substance that promotes or suppresses the replication of hepatitis C virus. Specifically, for

example, replicon replicating cells are cultured in the presence of a test substance, replication of the replicon RNA in the resulting culture product is detected, and then whether or not the test substance promotes or suppresses the replication of the replicon RNA is determined, so that a substance that promotes or suppresses the replication of hepatitis C virus can be screened for. In this case, detection of the replication of the replicon RNA in the resulting culture product may be conducted by detecting the quantity of, or the presence or the absence of, the replicon RNA in the RNAs extracted from the replicon RNA-replicating cell, or by detecting the quantity of, or the presence or the absence of, HCV protein contained in the proteins in the culture product or in the replicon RNA-replicating cells contained in the culture product.

Such a test cell system using the replicon RNA-replicating cells according to the present invention may be aimed at producing or evaluating a therapeutic agent or a diagnostic agent for treating hepatitis C virus infection. Specific examples of such purposes include the following examples.

(1) Search for a substance suppressing the proliferation of HCV of genotype 2a

Examples of a substance suppressing the proliferation of HCV of genotype 2a include organic chemicals directly or indirectly affecting the proliferation of HCV of genotype 2a, and antisense oligonucleotides directly or indirectly affecting the proliferation of HCV or the translation of HCV proteins by hybridizing to a target sequence in the HCV genome of genotype 2a or a complementary strand thereof.

(2) Evaluation of various substances having antiviral action in cell culture

Examples of the various substances include substances obtained through rational drug design or high throughput screening (e.g., an isolated and purified enzyme) and the like.

(3) Identification of a new target for attack for treating patients infected with HCV of genotype 2a

To identify a host cellular protein that plays an important role in proliferation of HCV virus, for example, the replicon-replicating cell according to the present invention can be used.

(4) Evaluation of the ability of HCV virus to acquire resistance against a drug or the like and identification of mutation concerning such resistance

(5) Production of a viral protein as an antigen that can be used for developing, producing and evaluating a diagnostic agent or a therapeutic agent for hepatitis C virus infection

(6) Viral genome replication system for producing HCV virus or virus-like particles that can be used for developing, producing and evaluating a diagnostic agent or a therapeutic agent for hepatitis C virus infection

(7) Production of a vaccine antigen that can be used as a vaccine against HCV of genotype 2a

(8) Production of hepatic cell-directed genetic vector that is used after the incorporation of a foreign gene therein for gene therapy

## 6. Examples

The present invention will be described more specifically based on the following examples and drawings. However, the technical scope of the present invention is not limited by these examples.

Example 1: Preparation of replicon RNA

(A) Construction of expression vector

DNA corresponding to the entire region of viral genome of hepatitis C virus JFH-1 strain (genotype 2a) that had been separated from patients with fulminant hepatic failure was obtained from a JFH-1 clone containing the full-length genomic cDNA of the virus strain. The DNA was inserted downstream of T7 RNA promoter sequence that had been inserted in pUC19 plasmid. The thus constructed plasmid DNA is hereinafter referred to as pJFH1. Similarly, DNA corresponding to the entire region of viral genome of hepatitis C virus JCH-1 strain (genotype 2a) that had been separated from patients with chronic hepatitis was obtained from a JCH-1 clone containing the full-length genomic cDNA of the virus strain. The DNA was inserted downstream of the T7 RNA promoter sequence that had been inserted in pUC19 plasmid. The thus constructed plasmid DNA is hereinafter referred to as pJCH1. In addition, the preparation of the above JFH1 clone and JCH-1 clone is described in JP Patent Publication (Kokai) No. 2002-171978 A and Kato et al., J. Med. Virol., (2001) 64(3) pp. 334-339. Moreover, the nucleotide sequence of the full-length cDNA of JFH-1 clone was registered at the International DNA Data Bank (DDBJ/EMBL/GenBank) under accession No. AB047639, and the nucleotide sequence of the full-length cDNA of the JCH-1 clone under accession No. AB047640.

The structures of the thus constructed plasmid DNA pJFH1 and pJCH1 are shown in the upper section of Fig. 1. "T7" represents T7 RNA promoter, and "G" represents dGTP inserted upstream of the 5' end of the inserted JFH-1- or JCH-1-derived DNA and downstream of the 3' end of T7 RNA promoter sequence. A region from "5' NTR" to "3' NTR" is DNA corresponding to the entire genomic region of hepatitis C virus.

Next, the structural regions and a part of the non-structural regions of plasmid DNA pJFH1 and pJCH1 were substituted with a neomycin resistance gene (neo; also referred to as a neomycin phosphotransferase gene) and EMCV-IRES (internal ribosome entry site of encephalomyocarditis virus), thereby constructing plasmid DNA pSGREP-JFH1 and pSGREP-JCH1, respectively (lower section of Fig. 1). This construction procedure was conducted according to a previous report (Lohmann et al., Science, (1999) 285, pp. 110-113). Specifically, plasmid pJFH1 and pJCH1 were cleaved with restriction enzymes *Age* I and *Cla* I, and between the *Age* I and *Cla* I restriction sites, the following fragments were inserted to be ligated; a fragment was prepared by binding of a sequence ranging from 5' NTR to Core region derived from pJFH-1 with the neomycin resistance gene derived from pRSV5NEO by PCR amplification and then cleaving it with restriction enzymes *Age* I and *Pme* I, and, a fragment was prepared by binding of sequences ranging from EMCV IRES to NS3 region by PCR amplification and then cleaving it with restriction enzymes *Pme* I and *Cla* I.

Moreover, a mutation that mutates an amino acid motif GDD to GND, corresponding to the active center of RNA polymerase encoded by the NS5B region, was introduced into the NS5B region in pSGREP-JFH1, thereby preparing a mutant plasmid clone pSGREP-JFH1/GND.

Moreover, a mutation that results in the deletion of a sequence of 10 continuous amino acids containing an amino acid motif GDD corresponding to the active center of RNA polymerase encoded by the NS5B region was introduced into the NS5B region in pSGREP-JFH1, thereby preparing a mutant plasmid clone pSGREP-JFH1/dGDD.

The above-prepared mutant clones pSGREP-JFH1/GND and pSGREP-JFH1/dGDD cannot express active NS5B protein, which is required for

the replication of replicon RNA, because the amino acid sequence of the active site of NS5B protein encoded by these clones has mutated.

(B) Preparation of replicon RNA

To prepare template DNA for use in synthesis of replicon RNA, the above-constructed expression vectors pSGREP-JFH1, pSGREP-JCH1, pSGREP-JFH1/GND and pSGREP-JFH1/dGDD were each cleaved with a restriction enzyme *Xba* I.

Subsequently, 10 to 20 μg each of these *Xba* I-cleaved fragments was contained in 50 μl of a reaction solution, and then further treated by 30 minutes of incubation at 30°C with 20 U of Mung Bean Nuclease. Mung Bean Nuclease is an enzyme catalyzing a reaction for selectively degrading a single-stranded portion of double-stranded DNA. Generally, when RNA synthesis is performed using directly the above *Xba* I-cleaved fragment as a template, a replicon RNA having four nucleotides of CUGA, a part of the recognition sequence of *Xba* I, excessively added to the 3' terminus would be synthesized. Hence, in this example, *Xba* I-cleaved fragments were treated with Mung Bean Nuclease, so as to remove the four nucleotides of CUGA from the fragments. The solutions containing *Xba* I-cleaved fragments, which had been treated with Mung Bean Nuclease, were treated to remove proteins according to a general method, so that *Xba* I-cleaved fragments, from which the four nucleotides of CUGA had been removed, were purified and used as template DNAs.

Next, from the template DNA, RNA was synthesized in vitro using T7 RNA polymerase. For this RNA synthesis, MEGAscript from Ambion, Inc. was used. Reaction was carried out using 20 μl of a reaction solution containing 0.5 to 1.0 micrograms of the template DNA according to the instructions of the manufacturer.

After completion of RNA synthesis, DNase (2 U) was added to the reaction solution to conduct reaction at 37°C for 15 minutes. RNA extraction using acidic phenol was further performed to remove the template DNA. RNAs (replicon RNAs) synthesized in this manner from the above template DNAs derived from pSGREP-JFH1, pSGREP-JCH1, pSGREP-JFH1/GND and pSGREP-JFH1/dGDD were respectively named rSGREP-JFH1, rSGREP-JCH1, rSGREP-JFH1/GND and rSGREP-JFH1/dGDD. Regarding the nucleotide sequences of these replicon RNAs, the nucleotide sequence of rSGREP-JFH1 is shown in SEQ ID NO: 1 and Fig. 2A to F, that of rSGREP-JCH1 is shown in SEQ ID NO: 2 and Fig. 3A to F, that of rSGREP-JFH1/GND is shown in SEQ ID NO: 7, and that of rSGREP-JFH1/dGDD is shown in SEQ ID NO: 8.

Example 2: Establishment of replicon-replicating cell clone

(C) Transfection of replicon RNA, determination of colony-forming ability of transfected cells and establishment of cell clones

Each of the above-synthesized replicon RNAs (rSGREP-JFH1, rSGREP-JCH1, rSGREP-JFH1/GND and rSGREP-JFH1/dGDD) was mixed in different quantities with total cellular RNA extracted from Huh7 cells so as to have a total RNA quantity of 10 μg. Subsequently, the mixed RNA was introduced into Huh7 cells by the electroporation method. The Huh7 cells subjected to the electroporation treatment were seeded into culture dishes, and then cultured for 16 hours to 24 hours. G418 (neomycin) was then added to the culture dishes at different concentrations. Thereafter, culture was continued while exchanging the culture solutions twice a week. After 21 days of culture following seeding, surviving cells were stained with crystal violet. The number of stained colonies was counted, and then the number of colonies obtained per μg of the transfected replicon RNA was calculated.

For rSGREP-JFH1 or rSGREP-JCH1-transfected cells, for which colony formation had been observed, colonies of the surviving cells were further cloned from the above culture dishes after 21 days of culture, and were continuously cultured. By such cloning of colonies, several strains of cell clones could be established.

For the established cell clones, detection of the replicated replicon RNA, confirmation of the presence or the absence of the incorporation of the neomycin resistance gene into the host genomic DNA, and confirmation of the expression of HCV proteins were performed as described later, in Example 4. Cell clones for which the replication of the replicon had been confirmed in the cells were regarded as replicon-replicating cell clones.

(D) Colony-forming ability in each transfected cell

As a result of the above transfection, for rSGREP-JFH1-transfected Huh7 cells, the colony-forming ability per μg of the transfected replicon RNA was 94700 CFU (Colony Forming Unit)/μg·RNA when G418 concentration was 1.0 mg/ml (the left column in Fig. 4). In contrast, colony formation was not observed in the Huh7 cells, into which rSGREP-JFH1/dGDD and rSGREP-JFH1/GND had each been transfected (the central column and the right column in Fig. 4). This suggests that the colony-forming ability confirmed for the Huh7 cells, into which rSGREP-JFH1 replicon RNA had been transfected, depends on the activity of NS5B (RNA polymerase) expressed by rSGREP-JFH1. Specifically, it was considered that in cells that had formed colonies, rSGREP-JFH1 replicon RNA autonomously replicated due to the action of NS5B expressed by rSGREP-JFH1, and the neomycin resistance gene was continuously expressed to maintain G418 resistance, so that cell growth was enabled.

On the other hand, in the Huh7 cells, into which rSGREP-JCH1 had been

transfected, no colony formation was observed in the case of 1 to 0.5 mg/ml G418 concentrations (Fig. 5). When G418 concentration was lowered to 0.25 mg/ml, colony formation was observed in the Huh7 cells, into which rSGREP-JCH1 had been transfected as well.

Furthermore, *Xba* I-cleaved fragment of the expression vector pSGREP-JFH1 obtained in (B) above was used as a template DNA for RNA synthesis without treating the fragment with Mung Bean Nuclease, so as to synthesize replicon RNA. This replicon RNA was transfected to Huh7 cells in a manner similar to that in (C) above. The replicon RNA that had been prepared without performing Mung Bean Nuclease treatment had the four nucleotides of CUGA excessively added to the 3' terminus.

As a result, the colony-forming ability of the Huh7 cells, into which the replicon RNA prepared without treatment with Mung Bean Nuclease had been transfected, decreased to 512 CFU/μg·RNA (the left side in Fig. 6). This result revealed that the sequence on the 3' terminus of the replicon RNA affects the colony-forming ability of the transfected cells.

Example 3

(E) Re-transfection of replicated replicon RNA derived from replicon-replicating cells

From the replicon-replicating cell clones that had been established by transfection of rSGREP-JFH1 into Huh7 cells according to descriptions of Example 2, total RNA was extracted by a standard procedure. The number of copies of the replicated replicon RNA contained in the cellular RNA was determined by Northern blot analysis and a quantitative RT-PCR method.

Northern blot analysis was performed according to the description in

Molecular Cloning, A laboratory Manual, 2nd edition, J. Sambrook, E. F. Fritsch, T. Maniatis, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press (1989). Specifically, RNA extracted from the cells was subjected to denaturing agarose electrophoresis. After electrophoresis, the RNA was transferred onto a positively charged nylon membrane. The $^{32}$P-labeled DNA or RNA probe prepared from pSGREP-JFH1 was hybridized to the RNA transferred to the membrane as described above. Next the membrane was washed, and then exposed to a film, so as to detect a replicon-specific RNA band.

Detection of the replicon RNA by quantitative RT-PCR was conducted by detecting the 5' untranslated region RNA within HCV RNA according to Takeuchi T, Katsume A, Tanaka T, Abe A, Inoue K, Tsukiyama-Kohara K, Kawaguchi R, Tanaka S and Kohara M., Real-time detection system for quantification of Hepatitis C virus genome, Gastroenterology 116: 636-642 (1999). Specifically, the replicon RNA contained in RNA extracted from the cells was amplified by PCR using synthetic primers: R6-130-S17, 5'-CGGGAGAGCCATAGTGG-3' (SEQ ID NO: 13) and R6-290-R19, 5'-AGTACCACAAGGCCTTTCG-3' (SEQ ID NO: 14); TaqMan Probe; R6-148-S21FT, 5'-CTGCGGAACCGGTGAGTACAC-3' (SEQ ID NO: 15) and an EZ rTth RNA PCR kit, and then detected using an ABI Prism 7700 sequence detector system.

Next, aliquots of total cellular RNAs extracted from clone 6 (among the above-mentioned replicon-replicating cell clones) and pool clones (prepared by collecting replicon-replicating cells that had formed colonies from whole one dish and culturing them) were each introduced into another Huh7 cells by retransfection. Total cellular RNA used for the transfection was prepared to contain $1x10^7$ copies of replicon RNA based on the number of copies of the above-determined replicon RNA. Transfection was performed as described in (C) above, and then selective culture was performed under G418 concentration

conditions of 1 mg/ml. Thus, the colony formation of the replicon-replicating cells was observed (Fig. 7). The colony-forming ability in this case was 1 colony or more per $1x10^6$ copies of the replicon RNA used for transfection, when it was calculated from the number of colonies obtained.

On the other hand, the number of copies of in vitro synthetic RNA that had been synthesized in vitro using pSGREP-JFH1 as a template and T7 RNA polymerase was approximately $2x10^{11}$ copies/μg·RNA, when calculated based on the weight and the length of the RNA. The colony-forming ability in the case of using the in vitro synthetic RNA for transfection in a manner similar to the above method was 1 colony per $5x10^7$ copies. These results revealed that when RNA derived from cells extracted from replicon-replicating cells and in vitro synthetic RNA were each transfected to Huh7 cells as replicon RNA in the same number of copies, the use of the replicon RNA replicated within Huh7 cells resulted in colony-forming ability approximately 50 times higher than that of the in vitro synthetic RNA.

Example 4

(F) Detection of replicon RNA

According to (E) above, cell clones [clones Nos. 1 to 11] were established by retransfection of total RNA that had been obtained from the replicon-replicating cell clone established by transfection of rSGREP-JFH1 to Huh7 cells to another Huh7 cells. From the established cell clones and pool clones (prepared by collecting cell clones that had formed colonies from whole one dish and then culturing them), respectively, total RNAs were extracted by an acidic phenol extraction method. Subsequently the total RNAs were analyzed by the Northern blot method using a pSGREP-JFH1-specific probe as a probe. As control, total RNA extracted similarly from untransfected Huh7 cells (in Fig. 8, denoted as "Huh7"), a sample prepared by adding $10^7$ copies of replicon RNA

synthesized in vitro to the total RNA extracted from Huh7 cells (in Fig. 8, denoted as "$10^7$"), and a sample (in Fig. 8, denoted as "$10^8$") prepared by adding $10^8$ copies of replicon RNA synthesized in vitro to the total RNA extracted from Huh7 cells, were used. In Fig. 8, 1 to 11 represent cell clone Numbers.

As a result, RNA of approximately the same size as that of rSGREP-JFH1 was detected using a pSGREP-JFH1-specific probe (Fig. 8). Thus, it was confirmed that the replicon RNA from rSGREP-JFH1 that had been transfected at the beginning replicated and proliferated within the cell clones. In addition, it was shown that the cell clones differed from each other in the quantity of the replicated replicon RNA. In Fig. 8, for example, clones 2, 6, 9 and 10 contained high quantities of the replicated replicon RNA, and clones 4, 8 and 11 contained low quantities of the replicated replicon RNA.

(G) Confirmation of the presence or the absence of the incorporation of a neomycin resistance gene into genomic DNA

For the cell clones that had been obtained by retransfection of replicon RNA as described in Example 3, PCR amplification was performed using neomycin resistance gene-specific primers; sense primer, NEO-S3: 5'-AACAAGATGGATTGCACGCA-3' (SEQ ID NO: 16) and antisense primer, NEO-R: 5'-CGTCAAGAAGGCGATAGAAG-3' (SEQ ID NO: 17), and the host cellular genomic DNA extracted from each of the cell clones as a template, in order to confirm that the resistance of each of the cell clones against G418 was not due to the incorporation of the neomycin resistance gene into the genome. The cell clones used herein were the cell clones Nos. 1 to 8 obtained by retransfection of rSGREP-JFH1-derived replicated replicon RNA (rSGREP-JFH1-derived cell clones Nos. 1 to 8), and cell clones Nos. 1 to 6 obtained by retransfection of rSGREP-JCH1-derived replicated replicon RNA (rSGREP-JCH1-derived cell clones Nos. 1 to 6). As a result, as shown in Fig. 9, in the eight examined

rSGREP-JFH1-derived cell clones, positive clones showing the amplification of the neomycin resistance gene were not observed. For rSGREP-JCH1-derived cell clones, only 1 out of the 6 examined clones was positive (in Fig. 9, lane 3 in the right photograph). It was considered that this positive clone had acquired G418 resistance by the incorporation of the neomycin resistance gene in rSGREP-JCH1-derived replicated replicon RNA into the genomic DNA of the host cells. Thus, in the positive clone, unlike other clones, it was thought that the replicon RNA itself did not autonomously replicate within the cells. This was confirmed by the results of the experiment shown in the next (H) that no HCV proteins were detected from the positive clone.

(H) Detection of HCV protein

Protein was extracted from rSGREP-JFH1- and rSGREP-JCH1-transfected cell clones by a standard procedure, and then analyzed by SDS-PAGE and Western blot method (Fig. 10). The examined cell clones were the same as those used in (G) above: rSGREP-JFH1-derived cell clones Nos. 1 to 8 and rSGREP-JCH1-derived cell clones Nos. 1 to 6. In addition, a cellular extract from the cell obtained by transiently transfecting expression plasmid DNA containing NS3 gene into Huh7 cells was regarded as a positive control (NS3 protein). Furthermore, a protein extracted from the untransfected Huh7 cells was used as a negative control. A protein sample extracted from each cell clone was blotted onto a PVDF membrane (Immobilon-P, Millipore), and then detection of NS3 protein encoded by replicated replicon RNA was performed using anti-NS3-specific antibody (provided by Dr. Moradpour; Wolk B, et al, J. Virology. 2000, 74: 2293-2304). As shown in Fig. 10, in rSGREP-JFH1-derived cell clones Nos. 1 to 8 and rSGREP-JCH1-derived cell clones Nos. 1, 2 and 4 to 6, proteins of the same size as those of the positive control were detected. In rSGREP-JCH1-derived cell clone No. 3 (the clone detected as a positive clone in (G) above), no expression of NS3 protein was detected. That is, in

rSGREP-JCH1-derived cell clone No. 3, no replication of replicon RNA was confirmed. NS3 protein was not detected in the untransfected Huh7 cells, revealing that in cell clones wherein NS3 protein was detected, the transfected replicon RNA autonomously replicated so that NS3 protein was expressed.

Moreover, by the use of the serum of a hepatitis C patient as an antibody, the expression of NS5a protein from the replicon RNA was also confirmed in each cell clone for which the expression of NS3 protein had been confirmed as described above.

Based on the results of (G) and (H) above, it was confirmed that replicon RNAs were replicated in the cell clones established by transfection of the replicon RNA.

Example 5

(I) Analysis of adaptive mutation

According to descriptions of Example 3, total RNA obtained from the replicon-replicating cell clones established through the transfection of rSGREP-JFH1 into Huh7 cells was re-transfected to another Huh7 cells, thereby establishing 21 cell clones. Total RNA was extracted from each of these cell clones by a standard procedure. cDNA corresponding to the replicon RNA was synthesized using the total RNA as a template, reverse transcriptase Superscript II (Invitrogen) and primer 9641R-IH (5'-GCACTCTCTGCAGTCATGCGGCTCACGGAC-3' (SEQ ID NO: 18)). The composition of a reaction solution for the synthesis of cDNA by reverse transcription reaction is as shown below.

| Composition of Reaction Solution | Fluid Volume (μl) |
|---|---|
| 5x 1st strand Buffer | 4 |

| | |
|---|---|
| 2 mM dNTP | 5 |
| 0.1 M DTT | 1 |
| 9651R-IH primer (100 μM) | 1 |
| DW (distilled water) | 6.5 |
| Sample RNA (2 mg/mL) | 1 |
| RNasin (Promega) (40 U/μL) | 0.5 |
| Superscript II RT (Invitrogen) | 1 |
| Total | 20 μl |

In cDNA synthesis reaction, the above reagents other than RNasin and Superscript II were mixed to prepare a first reaction solution. The solution was heated at 90°C for 3 minutes, and then cooled on ice. Subsequently, RNasin and Superscript II were added to this reaction solution, and then the solution was allowed to react at 42°C for 1 hour, followed by another reaction at 70°C for 15 minutes.

Furthermore, PCR amplification was performed using the thus obtained cDNA together with five primer sets by the following procedures, so that DNA amplification fragments covering almost all the regions of the replicon RNA were obtained. The primer sets used and regions amplified by each primer set are shown in Table 1 and Table 2 below.

Table 1

| Designation of amplified fragment | Primer set | | Amplified region |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Primer 1 | Primer 2 | |
| A/ | 42S-IH | 433R-neo | 41 - 470 |
| B/ | C/S17ssp | 4680R-IH | 28 - 3026 |
| C/ | 4534S-IH | 7279R-IH | 2880 - 5625 |
| D/ | 7198S-IH | 9367R-IH | 5544 - 7713 |
| E/ | 9247S-NF | 9576R-NF | 7597 - 7960 |

In Table 1, an amplified region is represented by nucleotide numbers in rSGREP-JFH1 (SEQ ID NO: 1) that the region corresponds to.

Table 2

| Primer designation | Nucleotide sequence (5'→3') | SEQ ID NO: |
|---|---|---|
| 42S-IH | CCCCTGTGAGGAACTACTGTCTTCACGC | SEQ ID NO: 19 |
| C/S17ssp | CCGGGAGAGCCATAGTGGTCTGCG | SEQ ID NO: 20 |
| 4534S-IH | CCACTCAAAGAAAAAGTGTGACGAGCTCGC | SEQ ID NO: 21 |
| 7198S-IH | GGCTTGGGCACGGCCTGA | SEQ ID NO: 22 |
| 9247S-NF | GCGGTGAAGACCAAGCTCAAACTCACTCCA | SEQ ID NO: 23 |
| 433R-neo | AGAACCTGCGTGCAATCCATC | SEQ ID NO: 24 |
| 4680R-IH | CCCGTCATGAGGGCGTCGGTGGC | SEQ ID NO: 25 |
| 7279R-IH | ACCAGCAACGGTGGGCGGTTGGTAATC | SEQ ID NO: 26 |
| 9367R-RI | GGCACGCGACACGCTGTG | SEQ ID NO: 27 |
| 9576R-NF | AGCTAGCCGTGACTAGGGCTAAGATGGAGC | SEQ ID NO: 28 |

The composition of a reaction solution in this PCR reaction is as follows.

| Composition of Reaction Solution | Fluid Volume (μl) |
|---|---|
| Primer 1 (10 μM) | 1.0 |
| Primer 2 (10 μM) | 1.0 |
| 2.5 mM dNTPs | 5.0 |
| 10x LA Buffer | 5.0 |
| $MgCl_2$ (25 mM) | 5.0 |
| LA Taq (TAKARA) (5 U/μl) | 0.3 |
| DW (distilled water) | 30.7 |
| Template cDNA | 2.0 |
| Total | 50 μl |

In addition, PCR reaction conditions are as follows: 95°C for 2 minutes; 35 cycles of 98°C for 10 seconds and then 68°C for 8 minutes; and 72°C for 7 minutes; after which the temperature is kept at 4°C.

The nucleotide sequence of each PCR product obtained as described above was determined, and then the RNA sequence corresponding to the DNA sequence was compared with the sequence of rSGREP-JFH1. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

| Region | Synonymous substitution | Nonsynonymous substitution | Total number of mutations |
|---|---|---|---|
| NS3 | 0 | 5 | 5 |
| NS4A | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| NS4B | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| NS5A | 0 | 7 | 7 |
| NS5B | 3 | 5 | 8 |
| Total | 3 | 22 | 25 |

As shown in Table 3, total number of nucleotide mutations observed in 21 cell clones was 25. 22 of these mutations were nonsynonymous substitutions inducing amino acid mutation. Types of these mutations are as shown in Table 4. In addition, the positions of these mutations in the non-structural region are shown in Fig. 11.

Table 4

| Clone | Mutation site | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| designation | Nucleotide No. | Nucleotide mutation | Amino acid mutation | Amino acid No. |
| C1 | 7098 | A ⇒ G | None | |
| | 7157 | A ⇒ G | Y ⇒ C | 2824 |
| C2 | 4955 | C ⇒ U | A ⇒ V | 2090 |
| C3 | 4936 | A ⇒ G | T ⇒ A | 2084 |
| | 5000 | A ⇒ G | Y ⇒ C | 2105 |
| | 7287 | A ⇒ G | None | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 7288 | A ⇒ G | M ⇒ V | 2868 |
| C4 | 5901 | G ⇒ U | E ⇒ D | 2405 |
| | 6113 | A ⇒ U | H ⇒ L | 2476 |
| C5 | 2890 | A ⇒ G | K ⇒ E | 1402 |
| C6 | 7209 | A ⇒ G | None | |

In Table 4 and Fig. 11, "C1 to C6" represent replicon-replicating cell clones C1 to C6 having replicon RNA found to have mutations. "Nucleotide No." shows the corresponding nucleotide numbers within the nucleotide sequence of replicon RNA rSGREP-JFH1 (SEQ ID NO: 1). "Amino acid No." shows the corresponding amino acid numbers within the amino acid sequence encoded by the JFH-1 clone (SEQ ID NO: 4). The types of nucleotides and amino acids at mutation sites are described according to their general notations. As shown in Table 4, in clone C2, a nucleotide corresponding to nucleotide No. 4955 of SEQ ID NO: 1 on the replicon RNA mutated from C (cytosine) to U (uracil), which results in a mutation of an amino acid corresponding to amino acid No. 2090 of SEQ ID NO: 4 from A (alanine) to V (valine).

Furthermore, mutation positions shown in Fig. 11 are shown with bar lines with the nucleotide numbers shown in Table 4. A thick bar line represents nonsynonymous substitution, and a thin bar line represents synonymous substitution.

There were 2 clones having no nucleotide mutations at all that cause amino acid mutations. When Northern blot analysis was conducted for the 2 clones, it was shown that in these 2 clones, the quantity of replicon RNAs replicated was lower than those in the cell clones that had replicated replicon RNAs having a nucleotide mutation that causes an amino acid mutation. Hence, it was considered that the nucleotide mutation causing an amino acid mutation within the

replicon RNA was an adaptive mutation for increasing the replication efficiency of the replicon RNA in Huh7 cells.

Example 6

(J) Establishment of replicon-replicating cell clone using cells other than Huh7 cells

According to the method described in Example 1, rSGREP-JFH1 was transfected into some hepatic cancer cells other than Huh7 cells and non-liver-derived cells. The transfected cells were seeded into culture dishes and then cultured. Colony formation was observed and the number of colonies was counted. The cells used for transfection are as follows.

(1) HepG2 cells (representative hepatic cancer cells as well as Huh7 cells)

(2) IMY-N9 cells (established by Ito et al; fusion cells of HepG2 cells and human primary culture hepatic cells (Hepatology 2001, 34: 566-572))

(3) HeLa cells (human cervical cancer-derived cells (Can Cer Res. 1952, 12: 264-265))

(4) 293 cells (human fetal kidney-derived cells (Gen. Virol. 1977, 36: 59-72))

The results of transfection using HepG2 cells, IMY-N9 cells, HeLa cells or 293 cells, respectively, are shown in Fig. 12A to D. As shown in Fig. 12A to D, all HepG2 cells, IMY-N9 cells, HeLa cells, and 293 cells showed colony formation for rSGREP-JFH1-transfected cells.

For the established cell clones, detection of the replicated replicon RNA, confirmation of the presence or the absence of the incorporation of the neomycin resistance gene into host genomic DNA, and confirmation of the expression of HCV protein were performed as described later, (L) and (M). The cell clones, for which the replication of the replicon in the cells had been confirmed, were regarded as replicon-replicating cell clones. Specifically, it was demonstrated

that the use of rSGREP-JFH1 also enables the preparation of HCV replicon-replicating cells using hepatic cancer cells other than Huh7 cells and non-hepatic cells with which the production of HCV replicon-replicating cells had previously been unsuccessful (Blight et al., Science, (2000) 290; 1972-1974).

(K) Detection of replicon RNA in replicon-replicating cells using cells other than Huh7 cells

Northern blot analysis was conducted according to a description of Molecular Cloning, A laboratory Manual, 2nd edition, J. Sambrook, E. F. Fritsch, T. Maniatis, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press (1989). In accordance with the descriptions of the previous section (J), total RNA was extracted by the acidic phenol extraction method from each of the replicon-replicating cell clones that had been established by transfection of rSGREP-JFH1 into HepG2, IMY-N9 or HeLa cells respectively, and from pool clones of the replicon-replicating cells that had been established through transfection of rSGREP-JFH1 into 239 cells (prepared by collecting cell clones that had formed colonies from whole one dish and culturing them). Next, the total RNAs were analyzed by the Northern blot method using a pSGREP-JFH1-specific probe as a probe. As controls, total RNAs (lanes 1 and 17 in Fig. 13) extracted similarly from untransfected Huh7 cells and HepG2 cells, and RNA (lanes 2 and 3 in Fig. 13) prepared by adding $10^7$ copies or $10^8$ copies of the replicon RNA synthesized in vitro to total RNA extracted from Huh7 cells were used. As a result, RNA of approximately the same size of that of rSGREP-JFH1 was detected using a pSGREP-JFH1-specific probe (Fig. 13). Accordingly, it was confirmed that the replicon RNA derived from rSGREP-JFH1 that had been transfected at the beginning was replicated and proliferated within the cell clone. Furthermore, it was also revealed that the quantities of replicated replicon RNAs differed depending on cell type, and IMY-N9 cells were found to replicate the replicon RNA particularly efficiently. Moreover, it was revealed that the clones differed from each other in the quantity of the replicated replicon

RNA.

(L) Confirmation of the presence or the absence of the incorporation of the neomycin resistance gene into genomic DNA

For the thus established replicon RNA-replicating cell clone, PCR amplification was performed using neomycin resistance gene-specific primers (sense primer, NEO-S3: 5'-AACAAGATGGATTGCACGCA-3' (SEQ ID NO: 29), antisense primer, NEO-R: 5'-CGTCAAGAAGGCGATAGAAG-3' (SEQ ID NO: 30)) and the host cellular genomic DNA extracted from each of the cell clones as a template, in order to confirm that the resistance of each of the cell clones against G418 was not due to the incorporation of the neomycin resistance gene into the genome. The cell clones used herein were the cell clones Nos. 1, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13 obtained by retransfection of rSGREP-JFH1-derived replicated replicon RNA into HepG2 cells, and the cell clones Nos. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 obtained by retransfection of rSGREP-JFH1-derived replicated replicon RNA into IMY-N9 cells. As a result, as shown in Fig. 14, in the nine examined cell clones obtained by introduction of rSGREP-JFH1 into HepG2 cells, a positive clone showing the amplification of the neomycin resistance gene was not observed. In the 9 examined cell clones obtained by introduction of rSGREP-JFH1 into IMY-N9 cells, a positive clone showing the amplification of the neomycin resistance gene was not observed.

A similar examination was performed for cell clones obtained by retransfection of rSGREP-JFH1-derived replicated replicon RNA into HeLa cells, and cell clones obtained by retransfection of rSGREP-JFH1-derived replicated replicon RNA into 293 cells. Then, a positive clone showing the amplification of the neomycin resistance gene was not observed.

(M) Detection of HCV protein

Proteins were extracted from the established cell clones by a standard procedure, and then analyzed by SDS-PAGE and the Western blot method (Fig. 15). The cell clones examined in this case were the same as those used in the above section: the cell clones Nos. 1, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13 obtained by retransfection of rSGREP-JFH1-derived replicated replicon RNA into HepG2 cells, and the cell clones Nos. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 obtained by retransfection of rSGREP-JFH1-derived replicated replicon RNA into IMY-N9 cells. Furthermore, according to a previous report (Lehmann et. al., Science, (1999)), the HCV RNA replicon-replicating cell clone prepared by introducing rSGREP-JFH1 into HuH7 was regarded as a positive control (Fig. 15, lane 4-1, C6). Moreover, a protein extracted from untransfected cells was used as a negative control (Fig. 15, lane N). Protein samples extracted from each cell clone were blotted onto PVDF membranes (Immobilon-P, Millipore), and then detection of NS3 protein encoded by the replicated replicon RNA was performed using anti-NS3-specific antibody (provided by Dr. Moradpour; Wolk B, et al, J. Virology, 2000, 74: 2293-2304). As shown in the upper section in Fig. 15, a protein of the same size as that of the positive control was detected in the cell clones Nos. 1, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13 obtained by retransfection of rSGREP-JFH1-derived replicated replicon RNA, and in the cell clones Nos. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 obtained by retransfection of rSGREP-JFH1-derived replicated replicon RNA into IMY-N9 cells.

Moreover, by the use of the serum of a hepatitis C patient as an antibody, the confirmation of the expression of NS5a protein from the replicon RNA was performed for each cell clone that had been confirmed above to express NS3 protein. In this experiment, examination was performed in a manner similar to that in the case of the expression of NS3 protein, except using anti-NS5a antibody instead of the serum of the patient. As a result, as shown in the lower section in Fig. 15, a protein of the same size as that of the positive control was detected in the cell clones Nos. 1, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13 obtained by retransfection of

rSGREP-JFH1-derived replicated replicon RNA, and the cell clones Nos. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 obtained by retransfection of rSGREP-JFH1-derived replicated replicon RNA into IMY-N9 cells.

When similar examination was performed for the cell clones obtained by retransfection of rSGREP-JFH1-derived replicated replicon RNA into HeLa cells, and the cell clones obtained by retransfection of rSGREP-JFH1-derived replicated replicon RNA into 293 cells, the expression of NS3 and that of NS5a proteins could be confirmed.

As described above, it was confirmed that the replicon RNA was replicated in the cell clones that had been established through transfection of the replicon RNA.

Example 7

(N) Analysis of adaptive mutation

According to the descriptions of Example 3, total RNAs obtained from the replicon-replicating cell clones established through the transfection of rSGREP-JFH1 into HepG2 and HeLa cells were re-transfected into another cells of the each cell line, respectively, so that 14 cell clones were established for HepG2 cells and 8 cell clones were established for HeLa cells. From each of these cell clones, total RNA was extracted by a standard procedure. cDNA corresponding to the replicon RNA was synthesized using the total RNA as a template, reverse transcriptase Superscript II (Invitrogen) and a primer 9641R-IH (5'-GCACTCTCTGCAGTCATGCGGCTCACGGAC-3' (SEQ ID NO: 31)). The composition of a reaction solution for the synthesis of cDNA by reverse transcription reaction is as shown below.

Composition of Reaction Solution Fluid Volume (μl)

| | |
|---|---|
| 5x 1st strand Buffer | 4 |
| 2 mM dNTP | 5 |
| 0.1 M DTT | 1 |
| 9651R-IH primer (100 μM) | 1 |
| DW (distilled water) | 6.5 |
| Sample RNA (2 mg/mL) | 1 |
| RNAsin (Promega)(40 U/μL) | 0.5 |
| Superscript II RT (Invitrogen) | 1 |
| Total | 20 μl |

In cDNA synthesis reaction, the above reagents other than RNAsin and Superscript II were mixed to prepare a first reaction solution. The first reaction solution was heated at 90°C for 3 minutes, and then cooled on ice. Subsequently, RNAsin and Superscript II were added to the reaction solution, and then the solution was allowed to react at 42°C for 1 hour, followed by another reaction at 70°C for 15 minutes.

Furthermore, PCR amplification was performed using the thus obtained cDNA together with five primer sets by the following procedures, so that DNA amplification fragments covering almost all the regions of replicon RNA were obtained. The primer sets used and regions amplified by each primer set are shown in Table 5 and Table 6 below.

Table 5

| Designation of amplified fragment | Primer set | | Amplified region |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Primer 1 | Primer 2 | |
| A | 42S-IH | 433R-neo | 41-470 |
| B | C/S17ssp | 4680R-IH | 28-3026 |
| C | 4534S-IH | 7279R-IH | 2280-5625 |
| D | 7198S-IH | 9367R-IH | 5544-7713 |
| E | 9247S-NF | 9576R-NF | 7597-7966 |

In this table, an amplified region is represented by nucleotide numbers in rSGREP-JFH1 (SEQ ID NO: 1) that the region corresponds to.

Table 6

| Primer Designation | Nucleotide Sequence (5' to 3') | SEQ ID NO: |
|---|---|---|
| 43S-IH | CCCCTGTGAGGAACTACTGTCTTCACGC | SEQ ID NO: 32 |
| C/S17ssp | CCGGGAGAGCCATAGTGGTCTGCG | SEQ ID NO: 33 |
| 4534S-IH | CCACTCAAAGAAAAAGTGTGACGAGCTCGC | SEQ ID NO: 34 |
| 7198S-IH | GGCTTGGGCACGGCCTGA | SEQ ID NO: 35 |
| 9247S-NF | GCGGTGAAGACCAAGCTCAAACTCACTCCA | SEQ ID NO: 36 |
| 433R-neo | AGAACCTGCGTGCAATCCATC | SEQ ID NO: 37 |
| 4680R-IH | CCCGTCATGAGGGCGTCGGTGGC | SEQ ID NO: 38 |
| 7279R-IH | ACCAGCAACGGTGGGCGGTTGGTAATC | SEQ ID NO: 39 |
| 9367R-IH | GGAACGCGACACGCTGTG | SEQ ID NO: 40 |
| 9576R-NF | AGCTAGCCGTGACTAGGGCTAAGATGGAGC | SEQ ID NO: 41 |

The composition of a reaction solution in this PCR reaction is as follows.

| Composition of Reaction Solution | Fluid Volume (μl) |
|---|---|
| Primer 1 (10 μM) | 1.0 |
| Primer 2 (10 μM) | 1.0 |
| 2.5 mM dNTPs | 5.0 |
| 10x LA Buffer | 5.0 |
| $MgCl_2$ (25 mM) | 5.0 |
| LA Taq (TAKARA) (5 U/μl) | 0.3 |
| DW (distilled water) | 30.7 |
| Template cDNA | 2.0 |

Total 50 μl

In addition, PCR reaction conditions are as follows: 95°C for 2 minutes; 35 cycles of 98°C for 10 seconds and then 68°C for 8 minutes; followed by 72°C for 7 minutes, after which the temperature is kept at 4°C.

The nucleotide sequence of each PCR product obtained as described above was determined, and then the RNA sequence corresponding to the DNA sequence was compared with the sequence of rSGREP-JFH1. The results are shown in Table 7 and Table 8.

Table 7: Analysis of adaptive mutation of JFH-1 replicon in HepG2 cells

| Clone | Mutation site | | Mutation | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Nucleotide No. | Amino acid No. | Nucleotide | Amino acid |
| HepIH1 | 6826 | 2714 | C⇒A | Q⇒K |
| HepIH3 | 6887 | 2734 | C⇒A | T⇒N |
| HepIH5 | 6887 | | U⇒A | None |
| HepIH8 | 6580 | 2632 | U⇒A | S⇒T |
| | 7159 | 2825 | U⇒C | Y⇒H |
| HepIH9 | 3342 | | A⇒G | None |
| | 3594 | | C⇒A | None |
| | 7230 | 2848 | U⇒A | N⇒K |
| HepIH10 | 5052 | | U⇒C | None |
| | 6943 | 2753 | C⇒A | P⇒T |
| HepIH12 | None | | | |
| HepIH13 | 4302 | | C⇒U | None |
| | 5687 | 2334 | G⇒A | G⇒D |
| | 6110 | 2475 | A⇒G | Y⇒C |

As shown in Table 7, in the case of HepG2 cells, a total of 13 nucleotide mutations were observed in 8 cell clones, and 8 of these mutations were nonsynonymous substitutions that cause amino acid mutations. Types of these mutations are shown in Table 8. On the other hand, in the case of HeLa cells, a total of 7 nucleotide mutations were observed in 3 cell clones, and 5 of these

mutations were nonsynonymous substitutions that cause amino acid mutations. Types of these mutations are shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Analysis of adaptive mutation of JFH-1 replicon in HeLa cells

| Clone | Mutation site | | Mutation | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Nucleotide No. | Amino acid No. | Nucleotide | Amino acid |
| HeLaH1 | None | | | |
| HeLaIH2 | 5550 | 2272 | U⇒C | S⇒P |
| | 6252 | | A⇒G | None |
| | 7182 | | U⇒C | None |
| | 7217 | 2844 | A⇒G | H⇒R |
| HeLaIH5 | 3643 | 1653 | A⇒G | M⇒V |
| | 5851 | 2389 | G⇒A | A⇒T |
| | 5914 | 2410 | G⇒A | E⇒K |

In Table 7, "HepIH No." represents clone numbers of replicon-replicating cell clones that have replicon RNA and have been cloned using HepG2 cells. "Nucleotide No." shows the corresponding nucleotide number in the nucleotide sequence (SEQ ID NO: 1) of replicon RNA rSGREP-JFH1. "Amino acid No." shows the corresponding amino acid number in the amino acid sequence (SEQ ID NO: 4) encoded by the JFH-1 clone. The types of nucleotides and amino acids at mutation sites are described according to their general notations. As shown in Table 7, for example, in clone HepIH1, a nucleotide corresponding to nucleotide No. 6826 of SEQ ID NO: on the replicon RNA mutated from C to A, so that an amino acid corresponding to amino acid No. 2714 of SEQ ID NO: mutated from Q to E. Similarly, in Table 8, "HeLaIH No." represents numbers of replicon-replicating cell clones that have replicon RNA and have been cloned using HeLa cells.

In addition, when Northern blot analysis was conducted for clones having no nucleotide mutations at all that cause amino acid mutations, it was shown that the quantity of replicon RNA replicated by the clones was lower than that of a cell

clone replicating replicon RNA having a nucleotide mutation that causes an amino acid mutation. Hence, it was concluded that the nucleotide mutation in replicon RNA inducing an amino acid mutation was an adaptive mutation for increasing the replication efficiency of replicon RNA in cells.

## INDUSTRIAL APPLICABILITY

The replicon-replicating cells according to the present invention can be utilized as a culture system for the continuous production of HCV genotype 2a-derived RNA and HCV protein. Moreover, the replicon-replicating cells according to the present invention are useful as a test system for screening for various substances affecting the replication of HCV and/or the translation into HCV protein.

All publications, patents and patent applications cited herein are incorporated herein by reference in their entirety.

## SEQUENCE LISTING FREE TEXT

SEQ ID NO: 1. Explanation of artificial sequence: replicon

SEQ ID NO: 2. Explanation of artificial sequence: replicon

SEQ ID NO: 7. Explanation of artificial sequence: replicon

SEQ ID NOS: 8 to 12. Explanation of artificial sequences: synthetic RNA

SEQ ID NOS: 13 to 41. Explanation of artificial sequences: synthetic DNA